

Lonely Liberal Vows to Fight GOP Tide

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By Nancy Hill-Holtzman

Henry Waxman, a once dominant figure in Congress' dominant party, has become the epitome of the lonely liberal Democrat.

His views are as out of favor as his party. His life's work is on the chopping block, with Newt Gingrich and other Republican leaders holding the cleaver. Even Waxman's devotion to public service has been called into question by a segment of the public that equates politics with corruption.

"I'm stunned when I think large parts of the American people think it's wrong to have a career in public service, even though I've always considered it a high calling," Waxman said.

Admittedly taken by surprise when his party lost control of the chamber Nov. 8, Waxman said he briefly considered going into a new line of work -- quite a statement from someone who began his political career in 1968 and has represented the core of the Westside in the House for 20 years.

"I felt that way for a few days," said the 55-year-old congressman. "Now I'm ready to fight back this right wing wave that's sweeping the federal government. I don't think that's what the American people want and I certainly don't think that's what they deserve."

Until Election Day, Waxman was at the apex of his power, pushing his major cause in recent years a much publicized congressional investigation of the tobacco industry. But in one of the most dramatic examples of what this year's election meant to senior Democratic congressmen, Waxman's subcommittee on health and the environment probably will be headed by Rep. Thomas J. Bliley, Jr. (R-Va.), who comes from a tobacco-growing area and has announced that he will call off the probe.

"He's acting like he's taking over the tobacco committee, not the health committee," said a gloomy Waxman.

Waxman's own easy reelection was but a Democratic flicker in a Republican light show of epic proportions. Worse, Republicans have promised to take aim at much of what Waxman holds dear. Subsidized health care for the poor, environmental regulations and AIDS research are only a few Waxman favorites subject to overhaul.

"I was in the minority in many ways in the past," Waxman said in a lengthy interview in which he reflected on the election results. "Now I'm clearly in the minority." Waxman calls the Democratic reversal of fortune a "wake-up call" for a splintered party. And in a startling admission for someone who has been so tied to the congressional status quo, Waxman said, "Democrats have been in power for too long."

In the wake of historic gains by the GOP, Waxman said Democrats in Washington are awash in the kind of self-examination that only such a shellacking could trigger.

"Democrats are going through a soul-searching, regrouping and mourning process," he said. "It's going to take awhile."

The legislator has already reached his own conclusions about the forces that propelled the first Republican takeover of both houses of Congress since the 1952 elections (a time when he was preparing for his bar mitzvah).

"I think we failed," he said of his party. "We have to recognize we will be a permanent minority unless we put forward our agenda in a way the American people can understand it."

A case in point, he said, was President Clinton's health care plan, which Waxman termed an "unfortunate factor" in the Democratic losses. Voters, stirred up by advertising by special interests, didn't understand what the President was trying to accomplish, Waxman said.

By contrast, he added, the presumptive next Speaker of the House -- Gingrich, of Georgia -- has succeeded in delivering his message. But it's a message -- portraying Congress as out of step with the needs of everyday Americans -- that Waxman does not accept. Furthermore, he rejects that as the underlying reason for the Republican Revolution.

"People voted with a lot of anger and they focused their hostility on Democrats," Waxman said. "Many Americans are frustrated and frightened over a decline in earning power and over the fear that tomorrow may be worse for them." That is the one consolation he draws from this fall's vote. Republicans will no longer be able to simply block legislation, then blame Democrats for running an inept, corrupt Congress. Instead, the lines will be clearly drawn, and the GOP will be held accountable by the public, Waxman said. One was a measure to require stricter rules for lobbyists. Another was legislation to make environmental and sexual harassment laws apply to Congress, which is now immune from them.

And as the Republican majority works to slash government spending programs, Waxman said, voters will come face to face with what it means to cut services to the needy, which may not be so appealing in practice as on paper. "I think it's horrible we are going to be treating people who need help because they're old or poor or sick as though they are somehow undeserving," he said.

He said post-election "gloating" by Gingrich and other GOP leaders is a first step in educating the public to the kind of regime they have empowered.

"It's very ungracious of them," Waxman said. "President Clinton held out his hand to Republicans right after the election and Newt Gingrich tried to bite it off."

But even if the Republican agenda proves unpopular, Waxman said, it will not be enough to return Democrats to power unless they unite behind their leadership. He called on Democrats who have tried to fend off the conservative tide by taking Republican positions to return to their roots.

Although a pragmatic politician, Waxman has not backed away from his roots, despite the unfashionable standing of liberalism. He appears unconcerned about his political future too.

Although he no longer enjoys the clout that made him, in the words of the American Political Almanac, "about as powerful as a House member can be," Waxman won 68% of the vote in his district -- a larger margin than two years ago.

Under the House seniority system, Waxman won't lose his office or parking place. Indeed, he was eligible for, but turned down, better digs that became available because so many of his colleagues got the boot from voters.

But there isn't an office in Washington that could compensate the Westside lawmaker for what he lost Nov. 8 -- the power to shape the American agenda.

He made it clear he would like to get it back, saying: "When you're in the minority, you have to fight to become a majority."